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ABSTRACT

Planned, individualized vocabulary instruction is an essential ingredient of developmental reading classes, and deserves special attention, since expanding word knowledge is the one area related to reading comprehension in which student progress can be directly observed and measured by the learner in daily or weekly increments. The two factors that appear to exert the most positive influence upon vocabulary acquisition are the utilization of students' personal experiences and existing knowledge, and the use of context, or deriving a word's meaning from the surrounding text. A teaching strategy that integrates these two factors refines the vocabulary acquisition process through carefully structured, active individual involvement. Each week students are required to identify 10 previously unknown or partially known words from within a range of printed materials designated by the instructor. Students print the unfamiliar word on one side of an index card. On the other side, they write the sentence in which the word was found, the dictionary pronunciation guide entry, and a paraphrase of the dictionary definition. Teachers then check the cards for semantic appropriateness. The cards may be used as flashcards to evaluate student word knowledge. This method enhances student/teacher interaction and the initial and cumulative word knowledge evaluations, while growth in the students' card decks helps to increase their confidence. (HTH)

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Individualized Vocabulary Instruction in Developmental Reading

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Individualized Vocabulary Instruction

in Developmental Reading

Planned, individualized vocabulary instruction is an essential ingredient of developmental reading classes. The importance of the knowledge acquired through such instruction is underscored by re-examining just what it means to know a word. Although it is still not clear "if Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell were left in a room for three hours, they could decide that they really knew the meaning of 'dog'" (Anderson and Freebody, 1981), it is certain that words symbolize concepts and that conceptual knowledge is a requisite for reading comprehension. As Roe, Stoodt, and Burns (1983) explain, "Words are labels for thoughts, ideas, concepts, and for the relationships among them; thus, words permit the manipulation of ideas."

Vocabulary instruction deserves special attention in developmental reading classes since expanding word knowledge is the one area related to reading comprehension in which daily or weekly increments of student progress can be directly observed and measured by the learner. Unlike assessing the development of skill in inferencing or critical reading, indicators of progress in vocabulary acquisition--such as the number of words learned per week--can be easily monitored and graphically illustrated. Such immediate and concrete feedback about learning can make a critical contribution toward improving the attitudes and performances of academically deficient students who may be experiencing considerable frustration and self-doubt.

Methods for teaching vocabulary in developmental reading, or any classes, should be based on research findings and sound educational theory. Although there has not been an abundance of recent research on effective methods of vocabulary instruction, key studies and the experiences of teachers strongly

indicate two factors which appear to exert the most positive influence upon vocabulary acquisition. The first of these is the utilization of each student's personal experiences and existing knowledge base to aid with the integration of new, unfamiliar words into that individual's vocabulary bank. In their review of research on vocabulary instruction, Manzo and Sherk (1971-72) concluded that "teaching vocabulary may be a relatively simple matter of exploiting experiences, and exploiting or using vocabulary as a means of getting the most from experiences." Successful use of such strategies for using student experiences has been reported by Manzo (1983) and Spiegel (1984).

The second factor is the use of context, or how a word's meaning is determined by other words which surround it in text. Such use of context in vocabulary instruction is supported by the recent research of Gipe (1978-79, 1980) and Duffelmeyer (1984), as well as by the experiences of Sinatra (1977) and Mateja (1982).

A Teaching Strategy

The strategy for teaching vocabulary described in this article integrates the utilization of individual students' needs and experiences with the use of sentence context in determining specific situational word meaning. The activity is, furthermore, designed to provide practice with the dictionary and to refine the vocabulary acquisition process through carefully structured, active individual involvement. Specific instructional goals are: (1) to improve the learner's reading vocabulary level on a highly individualized basis; (2) to facilitate the learner's understanding of, and ability to successfully use, the dictionary as an interactive tool in conjunction with other approaches to determining word meaning and (3) to develop expertise with a vocabulary expansion system which may be used in academic, as well as personal, reading pursuits.

Activity procedures are as follows: Each week students are required to identify ten previously unknown (or partially known) words from within the printed materials they encounter. Words may, at the instructor's prerogative, be drawn from as broad or narrowly focused an area of reading material as is deemed appropriate to meet specified learning goals. (For example, word choices might well be limited to a specific class textbook where knowledge of subject-specific vocabulary is the predominant need, or expanded to include supplemental readings such as related journal articles.) Word choice may also be left unrestricted, even to the extent that access to any sort of printed materials is permitted—novels, newspapers, or popular periodicals.

In addition to making choices regarding the type and range of materials from which vocabulary may be drawn, the instructor must also decide upon the word categories which best meet learner needs. The procedure might be designed to facilitate practice with the identification and assimilation of "key" or pivotal vocabulary items, i.e., words which render central conceptions within the discipline or reading assignments more accessible to readers. No matter what choices are made to delimit word categories targeted for study, each individual student must have the freedom within those limits to select words he or she chooses to learn. Student interests and personal experiences must be allowed to guide such subjective decisions.

Once initial instructional decisions regarding print sources and word selection parameters have been resolved, the following procedures must be explained to students. During reading activities where unfamiliar words are likely to be encountered, a small stack of 3x5 library cards—blank on one side and lined on the other—must be kept at hand. When a word is encountered (during reading) that the learner wishes to incorporate into existing vocabulary schema, the new word must be clearly printed upon the card's blank (unlined) side.

Insert Figure I Here

Next, the card is turned over and the sentence in which the word was found is written upon the bottom three or four lines (lengthy sentences may be excerpted so long as the segments are large enough to provide sufficient context). The word itself should always be underlined within the sentence.

Insert Figure II Here

A second item should also be kept on hand during reading--a dictionary of collegiate size--from which two additional pieces of information are to be drawn. These will be placed, along with the sentence, upon the lined side of the card, thereby completing its contents. The first, written upon the top line, is the pronunciation guide entry. The second, spaced some two or three lines lower, is the specific definition or word meaning which fulfills the semantic demands of the sentence.

Insert Figure III Here

This definition should be 1)as brief and succinct as possible (ideally, an accurate synonym), and 2) phrased in the student's own words. Active learning necessitates that the student read and consider all definitions, cognitively process each in light of sentence context, identify and condense the appropriate meaning, and then write it upon the card. (If dictionary definitions are merely copied and not processed, a major element of this activity is lost.) Semantic appropriateness or inappropriateness will be

easily detectable to the teacher when cards are checked; either the definition will fulfill the sentence's meaning or it will not. Examples of semantically inappropriate definitions, drawn from actual student cards, follow:

Sentence on Card: "In perfect hindsight, perhaps it should not come as such a shock."

Student's Definition: "a rear sight on a firearm."

Sentence on Card: "Hussein is not sanguine about his country's prospects of winning its war with Iran."

Student's Definition: "anything blood red."

Such errors offer the instructor a unique opportunity to interact with individual students by examining the examples, explaining semantic inaccuracies, and modeling how to process multiple dictionary definitions before determining which is most appropriate. Whether done one-to-one or via an overhead projector for whole-class instruction, directly-elicited student responses coupled with instructor feedback will provide tremendous insight into successful analytical approaches to context-specific vocabulary learning.

It must be pointed out that although this activity bears a surface resemblance to many time-honored "flash card" drill activities wherein 3x5 cards are used, it is designed to provide a great deal more instructional scope and flexibility. Here, cards enhance individual student/instructor interface rather than being utilized solely by students. This opportunity for direct feedback to teacher and student alike establishes a unique framework for one-on-one interaction, an activity much lauded in today's schools, yet seldom actually encountered.

Evaluation

Truly individualized instruction must be evaluated on an individual student basis. Although individualization often demands much extra time and effort of the instructor, evaluating students' progress in vocabulary acquisition does not need to be significantly time- or energy-consuming. The following guidelines can simplify the process:

1. Cards should be checked individually with each student, while the rest of the class is engaged in a reading or writing activity from which individuals are extracted for some 3 to 6 minutes.
2. Card checking should be conducted on two levels: 1) initially only for correct form and definitional choices, and then 2) periodically for objective evaluation of student knowledge of word meaning. Initial evaluation can occur twice or three times during the early part of the school term so as to thoroughly clarify instructor expectations and eliminate possible procedural misunderstandings. Objective evaluation is carried on throughout the entire term or for the duration of the procedure's implementation.
3. During the objective evaluation of newly-acquired word knowledge, students give their deck to the instructor, who then selects cards and holds each up. The student should be able to pronounce the word and give—in his or her own words—a simple, accurate definition. If an uncued definition is not forthcoming, the sentence upon the card may be read aloud so as to provide contextual clues. It is always appropriate to explain meaning more carefully if the student is close enough to evidence previous study. (Assigning grade values are a matter for the individual instructor.)

Week by week, as each student's card deck enlarges, the individual's confidence in his or her own ability grows with it. As repetitive study aids in retention of word meaning, it is advisable to require that all previous cards be brought to each individual evaluation session to be randomly sampled as a part of the evaluation. There is little point to students being able to retain word meanings just long enough for a single evaluation, thereby failing to have permanently incorporated these meanings into existing cognitive schema for long term future use.

Individualized vocabulary instruction of the type described herein is both practical and essential for students in developmental reading classes. The strategy works by eliciting active student involvement in an area of learning where progress is quickly made and easily observed by the learner. Both the knowledge and confidence gained by students through this activity can help them understand and enjoy more of what they read.

FIGURE I

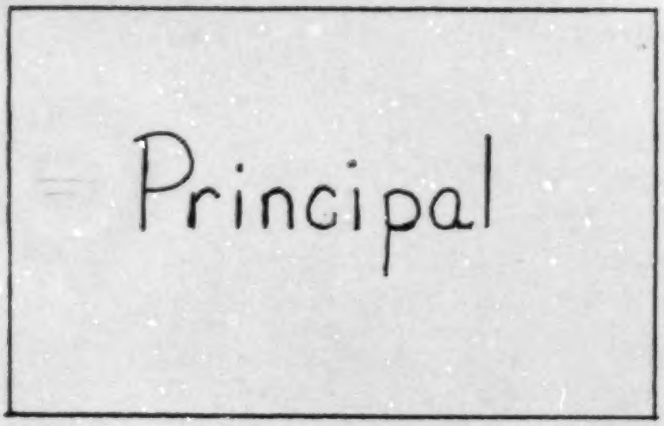


FIGURE II

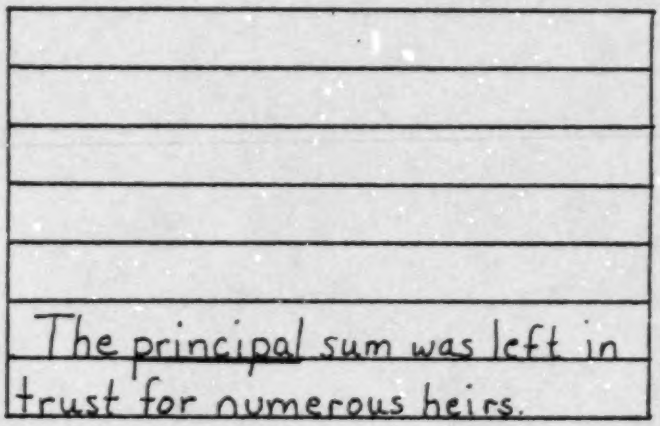
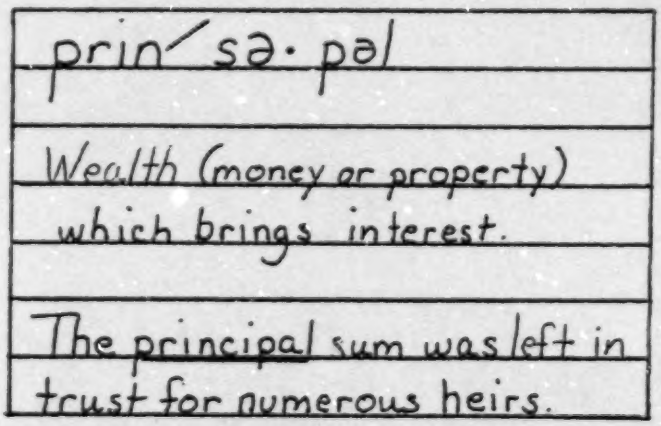


FIGURE III



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